DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 360 736 EA 025 188

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TITLE The Voice of the Principal in Shared Governance.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Role; Decision Making; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Governance; Interprofessional Relationship; *Participative Decision Making; *Principals; Teacher Administrator Relationship

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that explored the impact of shared governance on the principal's role are presented in this paper. Methodology included two telephone interviews and one onsite observation with 15 principals from 10 elementary, 1 middle, and 4 high schools in rural and suburban communities in Georgia. The schools participated in shared governance through their affiliation with the League of Professional Schools. Findings indicate that principals who decided to implement such a potentially frustrating and time-consuming process as shared governance believed that they did not have all the answers, trusted the teachers, and believed that better decisions would result. Principals implemented participative decision-making processes because of their natural leadership style, a critical incident, or concern about restrictive mandates. Critical elements for success included strong commitment by the principal, acceptance of role change, and a philosophical belief about sharing authority. Although principals with a collaborative nature may find shared governance more natural, those with more directive styles can change if they are committed to the shared-governance philosophy. Rather than passing mandates to initiate shared governance, invitations should be extended that encourage educators to explore the concept of shared governance and to develop a process. (LMI)

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ED 360 736

THE VOICE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN SHARED GOVERNANCE

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Atlanta, GA, April 1993

EA 025 188

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Shared Governance: The Principal's Voice

Across the country, numerous schools and districts are implementing a process of decision making known as shared governance. In some instances, this change in decision making was the result of external forces mandating that shared governance be used as the decision making vehicle for the school. In other situations, the decision to use shared governance was made after reflection on the part of the principal and discussions with the teachers who would be involved in the process. Regardless of the impetus for the change, shared governance requires both principals and teachers to assume new roles and to learn to work with each other in different ways. "Significant changes are taking place in how school leadership is viewed, understood, and practiced. These changes are part of a new administrative and organizational culture emerging throughout America's schools and reflects the adoption of new values, visions, beliefs, and commitments for school leadership." (Sergiovanni, 1987 p. 337.) As the focus has shifted to shared decision making, many principals involved in shared governance are being challenged to change the way they work with people at the school, district, and state levels.

Key Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact shared governance has had on the role of the principal. The areas of interest include the reasons the principal made the commitment to shared governance, the way they perceive their role as a result of shared

governance, and the way they deal with initiatives generated at the local school with those mandated by the district or the state.

Population

Participants for this study were selected based on their experience with shared governance through their affiliation with the League of Professional Schools. A total of 15 principals representing ten elementary, one middle, and four high schools participated. The schools are from rural and suburban communities in Georgia. The schools range in size from 500 students to 1900 students. The principals were selected for study based on the following criteria:

- All of the participants must have been principals of schools involved with the Georgia League of Professional Schools.
- The principal had to have been at the school when the school joined the League of Professional Schools. The principal received the initial letter and attended the League's Orientation and Planning Workshop.
- The principal had to have been involved with shared governance for at least three years.

Several issues make the League schools unique from other schools implementing shared governance:

- These schools are involved by "choice" rather than as the result of a mandate or political encouragement.

- The League does not advocate a specific model, rather each school develops its own process for shared governance with models varying widely from school to school. The League condition is that the governance process needs to be consistent with democratic principles of equality.
- Member schools must have at least an 80% commitment on the part of the entire faculty.
- Schools involved in the League represent 34 districts with a wide range in size of the school and the district.
- Affiliation with the League is based on the school's yearly commitment which the school can terminate at any time.

Method

Data were collected through two sets of telephone interviews and a one day on-site visit conducted by a League facilitator. The first set of interviews was conducted at the end of the schools second year as a member of the League. Field notes were taken during the interviews. The second set of interviews was made at the end of the third year of League membership. These interviews were taped and transcribed for analysis. An on-site report was written for each on-site visit and used as a data source. Additional documents generated by the school and submitted to the League were also analyzed.

Phase one of the data analysis involved reviewing the data concerning the level of shared governance at each school. During the last three years, data have been collected on each of the three premises of the League of Professional Schools. These data are based on

the on-site facilitation visit each year, the participation of the schools at League events, and interviews with the principals and teachers of each League school. The data indicate that schools are at various places on a continuum of shared governance. The following table illustrates the conditions of governance being implemented by League schools.

Table 1

Conditions of Governance: Process

Non-League	League	
Low	*Moderate*	*High*
• Unclear • Advisory • Policy in Place - Not Operational • Representatives Appointed	• Democratic Procedures Clear (Process is New) • Groups Make Decisions for Everyone Else • Elected Representatives or Volunteers at Large	• Democratic Procedures Understood by all and Institutionalized • Elected Body or Volunteers at Large set Priorities, Make Decisions, and Assess Results Through Schoolwide Process

It important to note that involvement in the League does not mean that all of the schools have smooth governance processes or that schools develop at the same rate. As in any other change, there are stops and starts in the process, and all of the League schools have experienced moments of exhilaration and times of frustrations.

Of the 15 schools represented in this study, 14 have successfully implemented a process of shared governance meaning they have moved into the moderate or high levels on the continuum. The smoothness with which this process operates varies among schools and has changed in each school during the three year period. Only one school was found to function at the non-League range on the continuum, indicating a low level of shared governance. This school has implemented an advisory council only, and the principal has retained the final decision making authority. For the purpose of this study, this school will be identified as School A.

The interviews were analyzed using content analysis. Initially, all of the fieldnotes and transcripts were read. Based on this reading, themes were identified from the data. The themes from the 14 schools implementing a shared governance process and the themes from School A were then compared.

Findings

The data provided by the principals concerning their roles, the changes they have experienced, and their perception of external forces such as district and state mandates differ considerably between the successful schools and the school using an advisory council only.

The Reason for Commitment

Several themes emerged concerning the motivating factor for becoming involved in the shared governance process. Natural style, critical incident, desire to bring about change in the school, and faith in teachers were the major reasons why principals began using shared governance.

Natural style

Belief in the process represented by the principal's natural style of leadership were frequently stated as the initial reason the principal became involved in the process. Eight of the 15 participants responded that this was their natural style and believed the process was the best way to lead. As one principal stated,

> ...that's pretty much always been my leadership style. I really feel that with the talent that we have in this building with teachers, that it's a crime not to use their good ideas, their education, their expertise, and their talent. (I6)

Another principal stated that it was the motivating factor in his becoming a principal. He wanted to work with people in improving education. (I27)

Critical incident

The second category that emerged as a motivator was a critical incident that motivated them to explore shared governance.

> Well, I guess several years ago after I participated in Education Leadership Georgia, I came back to my school after that year of intensive staff development, and I really wasn't satisfied with anything I saw.... I had been

> exposed to so much that I just saw so many areas that we could work on to improve our school. (I9)

Another principal was prompted to implement shared governance after reflecting on results of a teacher survey concerning the principal, while another explained her frustration at not being able to clearly communicate her vision.

Change process

The third major factor in committing to shared governance was an understanding of the change process and who should be involved if change was to be productive. Four principals elaborated on this component as they considered whether to implement shared governance.

> And I knew that the only way people were going to change was if they had a say so and if they had a stake; if they were stake-holders. ...But I always knew that nothing would change if I was the sole change source. And that if people weren't in power, they would not make the decisions that would be best for children. (I35)

Attitudes about teachers

It is evident that for a majority of these principals their perception of their leadership style contributed to their interest and commitment in having a shared governance process. It is also worthwhile to note that these 14 principals had very positive comments about the ability of teachers to make good decisions. They described the teachers in their schools as professional, committed, knowledgeable, and talented. There were strong opinions expressed concerning the quality of decisions made by teachers. Conversely, the principal from

School A described the teachers in her school as unprofessional, unwilling to be involved, eager to take control, and motivated by personal reasons.

New Roles

When asked about their role as principal in the decision making process, four principals stated that their role had not changed dramatically. All of these principals had indicated that their natural style of leadership was collaborative. Three of the four principals began their principalships and their association with the League of Professional Schools the same year. These principals never knew anything different personally, although they shared that they had worked with various kinds of leaders.

Facilitator

Nine of the participants indicated that their role as principal had changed dramatically. Their new role was described as being a facilitator, organizer, listener, contact person, and coordinator. As one stated:

> Now, because we have a very structured governance process, the teachers are really involved in decision making around instructional issues. So, what I find myself doing more of is serving as facilitator for decision making rather than a lot of top down decisions just by myself. (I6)

One principal described the decision making process as much broader now, and her role as a participator in the group.

> The role has changed from the administrator who is totally in charge of all decisions... that role has changed because the decisions are now shared decisions. (I17)

The fourteen principals implementing a shared governance process indicated that the shift from principal who made decisions to shared or teacher made decisions was gradual and developmental in nature. One principal stated that she had to learn to share her decision making responsibilities and to really trust the faculty.

A less positive response came from the principal in school A who indicated that her role had changed in that her work load had increased. She cited that the school lost one assistant principal and that the process of shared governance created conflict and adversity in the school.

Group member

Another significant change in the role of the principal was the way the principals perceived problems and the way they felt they were expected to solve these problems. Several principals indicated that prior to shared governance, they were expected to solve all of the problems. Now they were now part of a larger group of decision makers. One principal described it this way:

> In going back, it was the kind of thing in which people would bring problems to me and then wait for an answer. And it would have to come in most cases from me...Now, the problem sometimes still comes to me, although it also goes to a lot of other people and the typical answer is, Okay, I understand you have a problem, what can we do about it? If it's a big problem, school wide, that needs a lot of attention, we have learned how to organize a task force and put that into operation....under the old system, it most definitely would have been my responsibility. (I5)

One principal stated that his role had changed from the fixer to the facilitator. He was no longer the one to make everything right, rather, he provided the organization for the teachers to come together to solve problems. The issue of fixing something has changed to the mind set of problem solving and working to make things better. In addition to the role principals played during problem solving situations, they also discussed that teachers no longer depended on them for all of the answers. Few of the principals with a moderate or high governance process thought the teachers were dependent on them to make decisions or to fix things. This transition did not happen immediately, but rather over time. The teachers gained confidence in their own ability to make decisions and to solve problems and gradually shifted focus from what the principal or the district was going to do to what they as teachers were going to do.

Encourager

Another role which principals described they are now assuming is one of support and encouragement.

> Sometimes I think you have to be willing to let something fail, and let all the people who had responsibility for it share in the failure. And that's hard to do. I won't let that happen as far as the children are concerned, but I am willing to let it happen as far as the process is concerned. I think we'll learn more from it.(I27)

Principals who want change to occur must model risk taking and be willing for teachers to take risks. This has meant that everyone involved has had to deal with frustration, failure, and uncertainty.

District and State Mandates and Initiatives

When asked about their ability to deal with district and state parameters in addition to school generated initiatives, the responses fell into three main categories: those who did not view the mandates and initiatives as a problem, those who served as a buffer between the staff and the district and state, and those who worked to change the district and state initiatives and mandates while replacing them with school generated options.

No problem

Three of the 15 participants expressed that they had not experienced any problem with their district or the state. They stated that they realized that the initiatives and mandates had to be followed. They appeared content to work within the parameters set up by these outside forces. They shared with the faculty the parameters and explained that it was part of the district or state guidelines. Several principals stated that their districts were very supportive of their work, and they felt free to make decisions at the local level.

Buffers

A second group of principals (3) also expressed that they had not experienced any problem with their district or the state. Rather than being content to work within the parameters, these principals simply did their work quietly, were adept at circumventing what did not fit, and proceeded along the course their school had identified. They clearly saw themselves as the buffer between the district and the faculty. They shouldered the heat of the district and gave their faculties as much freedom as they could. One principal described her actions as ...

> Tap dancing. Locally I have had to work very hard.... We are finally rounding the bend on that one, but it has taken me all year. I really had some uphill battles. (I35)

Change agents

The third group of principals expressed concern about some of the district or state initiatives and mandates and found them to be restrictive. This group was actively engaged in their own school-wide agenda and at the same time was attempting to have these restrictions removed. They went about the process of removing the restrictions by meeting with their board of education, working with the central office, volunteering to pilot alternative programs, and applying for waivers through formal processes set up by the district or the state.

Interpretation and Conclusions: Listening to the voice of principals

The job of principal is difficult under the best of circumstances. What prompts a principal to implement a process for decision making that takes more time, involves more people, requires a great deal of hard work, and has the potential for causing a great deal of friction among a school staff? Based on the reports from the 15 participants, a principal who believes that he/she does not have all of the answers, trusts the teachers in the school, and believes that better decisions are a result undertakes the shared governance process. Although those individuals with a collaborative nature may find this type of leadership more natural, principals with more directive styles can change the way they make decisions and who is involved in the process if they are committed to the democratic philosophy of shared

governance. This commitment is essential if the trust mentioned by most of the participants is to be established among the faculty and staff. Actions speak louder than words and those with the best intentions slip and assume the role of "fixer" occasionally.

Principals involved in shared governance must be prepared for their role to change as well as the role of the teachers. Sergiovanni (1990) describes the ability to "share power" as power investment. Fourteen of the principals involved in this study commented on the growth in themselves as leaders, but also the growth in the teachers as leaders.

One study is not enough to draw firm conclusions, however, based on the data from School A, it is evident that the perception of the principal concerning his/her role, and his/her attitude concerning the ability of teachers to make good decisions has a critical impact on the success of shared governance. The process of shared governance is made more difficult and stands a good chance of failing if the philosophical beliefs of the principal are not congruent with involving teachers and sharing authority.

If shared governance is to be a successful component to school renewal, it appears that the principal must be fully committed to the process and the results. The principals discussed in this study reacted positively in than they chose to become involved rather that having the process mandated to them and their faculties. Even as they stated that they believed in the process and worked hard at it, the process was not smooth; it took a lot of work on their part to become a part of the group, not the leader of the group. It took time, in some cases three years, for the teachers to trust that the principal really believed that they, the teachers, should and could make a particular decision. It took a lot of time for the

principal to be able to sit back, not assume the leadership of a group, and allow issues to be discussed when in the past the decisions would have been made quickly with no input.

Principals perceive the parameters within which they work with a multitude of interpretations. Sergiovanni (1990) discusses the difference in the actions taken by principals even though they are "subject to identical demands and constraints." Principals within the same district have very different responses when asked about the role of the district in the way they do their job. What one person sees as a factual constraint and goes on about their business, another sees as an opportunity to move back the parameters and create a better educational process.

The motivation for becoming involved in shared governance has an impact on the success of the decision making process. Those who believe this is the "best" process for making decisions in schools should refrain from mandating such a process. Mandating a process does not alter the philosophical beliefs of individuals and a successful shared governance process is based on strong beliefs of the participants. Rather than mandates, invitations should be extended that encourages educators to explore the concepts of shared governance and develop a process that reflects the beliefs and values of the school. Shared governance is hard work even when there is a full commitment on the part of the principal and the teachers. The hard work, however, is not in vain. As one principal stated:

> This year I am seeing a greater sense of initiative on the part of teachers. When there are problems, they are much more likely to step forward and come up with solutions, and take the bull by the horns, and plan activities, and develop resources to solve

problems, rather than relying on me to be the sole source of information; sole source of ideas. And I also have seen them become much more problem solving oriented. They are much quicker to make decisions for children. Where they might have been reluctant before, they know that they are empowered to make those decisions now.

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